

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 1179
By DeBerry L

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of John D. Cooper of
Memphis.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly were greatly saddened to learn of the passing of John D. Cooper, the beloved husband of our colleague Representative Barbara Cooper; and

WHEREAS, John D. Cooper was an exemplary public servant and consummate professional who worked assiduously to improve the quality of life for his fellow citizens in numerous capacities; and

WHEREAS, born on June 21, 1929, in Mason, Tennessee, John D. Cooper was one of two children born to Johnny and Lucille Poindexter Cooper. Relocating to Memphis with his mother after the death of his father, he was raised in the Bickford community by his mother and stepfather, Samuel Jones; and

WHEREAS, a graduate of Manassas High School where he excelled in football, track and boxing, John D. Cooper earned a football scholarship to LeMoyne College. An agile swimmer and diver, he was highly regarded for his bravery, toughness, and competitive winning spirit in every athletic activity he pursued; and

WHEREAS, during his tenure at LeMoyne College, Mr. Cooper was drafted into the United States Army and proudly served his country, receiving an honorable discharge; and

WHEREAS, nobly seeking to serve his community and fellow man, John D. Cooper was one of the original twelve Black firefighters hired by the City of Memphis. He would retire after thirty-two years of service to the Department with the rank of Captain; and

WHEREAS, founder of the Pioneers, the firefighters' organization that fights injustice within the fire department, Captain John Cooper's picture hangs with the Black Firemen Portrait in the City of Memphis Fire Museum; and

WHEREAS, as he began his legendary firefighting career, John Cooper and all the other Black firemen were placed together at Station 8 at Mississippi and Crump in South Memphis. After these hard-working firemen had endured harassment and inequality for several years, a false alarm near LeMoyne Gardens Housing Development at which disparaging racial remarks were made from within the ranks would result in Black Fireman William C. Carter confronting his superiors about the racial slurs and subsequently being fired; and

WHEREAS, dismissed a few months later along the same lines, John D. Cooper joined with Fireman Carter in retaining Attorney H.T. Lockard to challenge the segregation system in the Memphis Fire Department. After two years of civil service hearings and court appeals, the United States Supreme Court ruled the firings unconstitutional and restored them to their positions with the Fire Department. Private John Cooper would serve twenty-one years before receiving a promotion; and

WHEREAS, Captain Cooper was instrumental in the stand taken to desegregate the City of Memphis Fire Department and bring an end to discrimination in hiring and promotion practices, providing specific scenarios in the depositions in the lawsuit in which the Pioneers were represented by Civil Rights Attorney Richard Fields; and

WHEREAS, after the African American contingency won the lawsuit, Captain Cooper assisted the City of Memphis Personnel Director, J.B. Trotter, with the return of other dismissed firemen who had left due to harassment by the Fire Department. Ironically, the firefighters who had a break in service and were brought back into service after the legal victory were promoted to higher rank over Mr. Cooper. Captain Cooper earned his promotion to Lieutenant, and later Captain, under the traditional system used prior to the legal action; and

WHEREAS, admired by his many friends on Capitol Hill in Nashville, including members of the General Assembly, Captain Cooper was especially proud of legislation he initiated that resulted in the passage of a House Joint Resolution that urged the City of Memphis to place the names of its first Black firemen on a fire engine. This fire engine is presently located at Fire Station 14 in Memphis; and

WHEREAS, John D. Cooper was a member of St. Augustine Catholic Church, which he served faithfully for many years; and

WHEREAS, deeply devoted to his family, John Cooper is survived by his loving wife of fifty-five years, Representative Barbara Cooper; children, Carl Cooper, Reverend Joan Cooper Burnett and her spouse Wallace Burnett, and Tanya Cooper; grandchildren, Reneshia Burnett, Ashlea Burnett and Martez King; and great grandchildren, Aubreyana Gilmer and Sean Wallace; and

WHEREAS, preceded in death by his sister, Gladys Hollowell-Rhodes, Mr. Cooper will be sadly mourned, yet fondly remembered by special nieces, Joyce Hollowell and Bettye Woodall and her spouse Oscar Woodall; a host of special great nieces and nephews; childhood friend, Lawrence Albert; and many relatives and friends; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Cooper leaves behind an indelible legacy of integrity and probity in public life, compassion and loyalty in private life, and diligence and dedication in all his chosen endeavors; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting that this General Assembly should pause to remember the bountiful life of this exceptional public servant and human being; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED FOURTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of John D. Cooper, reflecting fondly upon his impeccable character and his stalwart commitment to living the examined life with courage and conviction.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we express our deepest sympathy and offer our condolences to our dear colleague Representative Barbara Cooper and the remaining family of Mr. Cooper.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.